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SUBJECT: PHILIPPINES LOOKING FOR WAYS TO NUDGE BURMA TOWARD
DEMOCRACY

REF: MANILA 593 AND PREVIOUS

11. (SBU) Summary: In a meeting at the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) on March 2, EAP/MTS Director Marciel underscored the USG's concern with the Burmese government's record on democracy and rights and urged the Philippines, while chairing ASEAN, to press for a unified, regional voice to seek political change in Burma. Manalo expressed support for a "caring and sharing" approach that might include training for Burmese diplomats and perhaps local officials. The DFA has traditionally been less forward-leaning on Burma than Philippine political leadership, especially President Arroyo. End Summary.

12. (SBU) EAP/MTS Director Marciel and Pol/C met on March 2 with Assistant Secretary of Foreign Affairs for Asia and the Pacific Romeo Manalo to discuss Burma. Marciel expressed the USG's concern over negative developments in Burma and their implications for regional security. He urged the Philippines and ASEAN to press for progress toward democracy, but not to confuse completion of the National Convention with genuine progress. The current National Convention would not lead to national reconciliation and instead seemed an instrument to exclude the opposition while retaining power by the military. He expressed appreciation for the thoughtful remarks in the Chairman's statement at the January ASEAN Summit, and urged that the Philippines continue to play a leadership role in ensuring that ASEAN encouraged positive change in Burma.

13. (SBU) A/S Manalo assured Marciel that the Philippines also remained concerned about Burma, but asserted that "country-bashing" would be counter-productive. Manalo stated that pushing Burmese government too hard might cause its leaders to retrench and endanger democratization. Manalo acknowledged that the ASEAN "troika" of the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia had not yet been able to take action, because the Burmese authorities had not responded positively to the concept. He noted that the DFA was considering an offer to train Burmese diplomats and perhaps local officials as part of ASEAN's overall theme this year of a "caring and sharing" community. Manalo expressed interest in any creative ideas or other information on how to engage Burma from U.S. think tanks or other groups. Informally, Manalo said that former Philippine President Fidel Ramos might be an effective new U.N. envoy to Burma.

14. (SBU) Comment: President Arroyo has demonstrated the strongest Philippine leadership on Burma. The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) is often more concerned about ASEAN unity. This was an excellent opportunity for DFA to hear our concerns directly from Washington.

15. (U) EAP/MTS Director Marciel cleared the cable.

KENNEY